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ABSTRACT

A practicum, in an alternative high school work setting, was designed to deal with the problem of a deficiency in the writing ability students needed to express themselves skillfully and adequately. The goal was to increase writing involvement and writing ability. The objectives included the organization of a writing program, the improvement of written communication for various purposes, an increase in writing participation and quality, and a lessening of writing apprehension with an increase in positive attitudes. The implemented solution centered on the initiation and operation of writers' workshops, utilizing process writing, modification of the teacher's role, student-centered classrooms, and student selection of topics and projects. The main idea in the workshop was for much writing to take place in an environment that encouraged participation, writing improvement, and risk-taking. This represented a start toward bringing needed change to the writing program of the school. The overall increase in writing quality was not documented, but a positive movement was seen in the lower section of the assessment range. More time may be needed to show an increase. The degree of participation, the amount of work accomplished, and the improvement in many attitudes was refreshing. The idea of a safe environment was fulfilled, and much writing took place with the students beginning to assume ownership of their own work and their learning. (Two tables of data are included; 38 references, a questionnaire, and a perception survey are attached.) (Author/RS)

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Improving Writing Skills in Alternative High School English Classes Through Writers' Workshops

by

Gaye S. Mouritzen

Cluster XXXVIII

A Practicum II Report presented to the
Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

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Approved:

March 4, 1993

Date of Final Approval of Report

Wm. W. Anderson

Dr. William Anderson

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The preparation of this practicum has involved much toil, multiple questions, and many tears. The unusual events and the life changes that this period of time has occasioned have definitely not simplified the process of the completion of this work.

Thanks go first to my Lord who has given the strength and the wisdom to make this work possible. Thanks then belong to many people who have offered understanding and realistic support through it all; among these are my family, my friends and coworkers at school, and the students who have kept me so busy with their writing.

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ABSTRACT

Improving Writing Skills in Alternative High School English Classes through Writers' Workshops. Mouritzen, Gaye S., 1993: Practicum II Report, Nova University, Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. Descriptors: English/Language Arts/Curriculum/Instruction/Writing/Writing Difficulties/ Workshops/Composition Processes/Written Composition/ At-Risk/Secondary Education

This practicum, in an alternative high school work setting, was designed to deal with the problem of a deficiency in the writing ability students needed to express themselves skillfully and adequately. The solution's goal was to increase writing involvement and writing ability. The objectives included the organization of a writing program, the improvement of written communication for various purposes, an increase in writing participation and quality, and a lessening of writing apprehension with an increase in positive attitudes.

The implemented solution centered on the initiation and operation of writers' workshops, utilizing process writing, modification of teacher role, student-centered classrooms, and student selection of topics and projects. The main idea in the workshops was for much writing to take place in an environment that encouraged participation and writing improvement and allowed for risk-taking.

The solution was a good one for these English classes and was a start toward bringing needed change to the writing program of the school. The overall increase in writing quality was not documented, but a positive movement was seen in the lower section of the assessment range. The time factor of the implementation was likely influential, with more time being needed to show the increase. The degree of participation, the amount of work accomplished, and the improvement in many attitudes was refreshing. The idea of a safe environment was fulfilled, and much writing took place with the students beginning to assume ownership of their own work and their learning.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of Work Setting and Community

The work setting for the practicum was a public alternative high school with a population of approximately 135 at-risk students. The students were considered at-risk of dropping out of school because they had been experiencing behavioral and/or academic problems in their previous schools.

Prerequisites for admission to this alternative high school include poor attitude, insufficient attendance, problem behaviors, and/or lack of academic achievement related to poor motivation. Enrollment, of course, fluctuates because of various situations and the problems of individual students, but a relatively steady base is maintained. Quite a number of students attend the school for one or more years, and each year is capped by the graduation of 10 to 20 students.

A student is not assigned to the school according to his place of residence or by county administrative decision; he may be referred through the school he is attending or may come by his own or his parent's choice. Admission is not

automatic and is granted only after an evaluation of records and one or more interviews with parents and student to determine their needs, desires, and intentions.

Because it is an alternative school, students from any part of this large county in south-eastern United States may attend. Therefore, the community of the school is actually the county itself, which comprises one of the largest school systems in the country. Due to the community size and diversity, the enrollment is mixed as to ethnic background and socioeconomic status with the middle and lower economic levels being predominant. The racial population is approximately 25% Black, 30% Hispanic, and 45% White. Various types of family structure are represented, and the range of parental background is wide, as is the degree of parental support. There are parents who have not completed high school themselves, and parents who are college-educated, professional people. Some parents are very interested in and supportive of the education of their young people, and others appear to be unwilling or unable to have any positive input into helping their students do better.

Because of their individual differences and the reality that many of them have interrupted their education by avoiding school, the students demonstrate a broad spectrum of academic ability. In order to deal with this span, the faculty and staff have restructured the school in regard to grouping, scheduling, and class length. Although the

students are enrolled in grades nine through twelve, for classes they are grouped homogeneously according to academic ability. Classes are 90 minutes in length and meet three times a week. Both students and teachers, therefore, have a different schedule each day of the week.

Writer's Role and Responsibilities

The writer held the position of English teacher for the top two ability groups, groups one and two, which could each include students in grades 9 through 12. These students comprised the target group for the practicum. The writer was to have been teaching four classes, having each group for two courses. This arrangement would have created a weekly schedule of twelve 90-minute periods, interspersed with planning time. However, due to unexpected rescheduling related to budget cuts, an additional class was assigned; this added three class periods with the resulting paperwork and lessened planning and editing time.

The teacher was expected to prepare the content of courses within the state frameworks and the county objectives. The most important issue was for the course content to prepare the students to use language and communication skills adequately to meet the requirements of their present academic world and the future demands of their personal and occupational endeavors.

As a classroom teacher, the writer was also responsible for smooth classroom operation and appropriate discipline. The school was started to help at-risk students make the changes in their lives that would be requisite to academic success and high school completion. It is set up basically on a behavior modification model. One tenet of the model is that the major goals of the classroom are teaching and learning. Thus, the teachers receive support from the administration and the guidance staff who handle situations in which a student must leave the classroom because of behavior that is disruptive to the learning environment.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

Students in the school were deficient in the writing ability needed to express themselves skillfully and adequately. The absence of this ability was demonstrated day by day in the work that the students handed in for their various classes. Teachers experienced difficulty in getting the students to do written work that made its point clearly and correctly, especially work that also contained correct grammar and spelling. Sometimes, nearly indecipherable handwriting further complicated understanding and was possibly a sign of disinterest or of an uncaring attitude.

Students lacked sufficient knowledge and ability in the areas of delineating and maintaining a clear purpose, adequately clarifying the ideas involved in conveying that purpose, and using the information and details that are necessary to fully develop the content. Many also lacked the knowledge of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, sentence completion, and grammar required for correct usage or for overcoming the carelessness they often showed in daily work.

These deficiencies affected the presentation of the students' work because they interfered with the impression which might otherwise have been made by worthwhile thoughts and ideas. Some students were able to understand and orally explain answers and information that were required for the assignments, but they were not capable of translating these ideas to a written form which could then be understood and appreciated by others. Lacking the ability to use these skills or the confidence about using them well would seem to result naturally in apprehension about writing. Daly (1978) comments on this connection between a seeming lack of appropriate writing skills and an apprehension toward writing but states that the directionality of the relation is not yet clear.

In addition to school work, these difficulties with writing would hinder some students in applying for jobs or perhaps in fulfilling the obligations of the jobs they already had. Even social and business communications would be affected by this problem of getting verbal and mental ideas onto paper.

The ideal situation would be for the students to possess the capabilities of expressing their thoughts and feelings correctly and of engendering more ideas through the process of writing. The ideal would also include enjoyment of writing by the students because they would comprehend the outlet for expression that it offered them and would have

the ability to utilize that outlet. They would not be overly apprehensive about writing because they would have the technical knowledge required and would have had varied writing experiences, giving them confidence. Obviously, the ideal situation did not exist in the school, and since utopias are not common, reality of the true ideal probably never will exist. However, the possibility of moving closer to that ideal did exist, and the practicum was directed toward that goal.

Writing had not been sufficiently emphasized throughout the school. It is difficult to add the additional time and effort involved in grading compositions or essay answers to the degree of teacher load in an alternative school. The continual emphasis needed to achieve successful writing is demanding, especially considering the lack of skill development due to student avoidance of school and studying.

The detrimental effects that these factors had on writing ability appeared in most all classes, but English classes provided the most likely base for diagnosis and improvement of the problem. It was seen that students in English classes were deficient in the writing skills that would allow them to express ideas and concepts clearly in the various types of written communication they use as students and also need for the future.

Problem Documentation

The documentation of the problem was collected by an assessment of student writing and by a faculty/staff questionnaire. In order to assess how well the student body was presently writing, a school assessment was done, using the prompt in the Vermont Uniform Assessment. Students were given 70 minutes to write about an experience they had in the past, a time when they felt happy, scared, surprised, or proud. The writing sessions were initiated and overseen by this writer, but they were actually administered by herself and two other teachers because of class distribution. It took some time to get all writing samples collected because of absentees, spring break, and working with the other teachers and their schedules, but all samples were completed within two and a half weeks of school. The total writing sample contained 125 papers.

The assessment of the samples was overseen by the writer but was done by four selected assessors, in order to provide objectivity. The writer removed the names from the papers and assigned each paper a number to give anonymity to the assessment. A list of the names was made and retained for future uses. Assessment forms were prepared for the ease of the scorers.

All papers were read and assessed twice; papers not receiving contiguous scores were read a third time. Then,

the two or three scores were averaged to provide a final score for each paper. Papers were scored according to the Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Holistic Scoring Guide (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1990, p. 6) which uses a scale of one to six, with six representing the best possible writing.

On this scale, the student-body writing samples were assessed at a mean of 2.86. Of the 125 writing samples, 101 papers, or 81%, received a score at or below 3.5 which is the mid-point of the scoring scale. Looking at both ends of the range of scores revealed further information. There were no scores above 5.0. and only one of those. Only 20 scores fell in the range of 4.0 to 5.0. At the other end, 30% of the 125 papers were rated a 2.0 or below. As mentioned, each paper was assessed two or three times to arrive at the final score. Of the 280 preliminary assessment numbers, 67% were a 3 or under.

Consideration of this data indicated that a large majority of the samples (84%) did not reach the assessment score of four. Four represents the criteria of "adequate focus, sufficient content, appropriate organization, some precision and variety in sentence structure and work choice, mechanical and usage errors not severe enough to interfere significantly with the writer's purpose." These criteria detail the minimum standards for clear, effective writing.

The questionnaire concerning student writing (see Appendix A) was completed by nine members of the faculty and paraprofessional staff. These were the members of the faculty/support staff to whom the questionnaire seemed applicable. The main part of the questionnaire was based on the Pennsylvania Holistic Scoring Guide (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1990, p. 6) and was designed to rate the frequency with which 16 positive qualities appeared in student writing. The respondents used a scale of zero to five, with five indicating the most frequent use.

The ratings of the 16 qualities on each questionnaire were averaged; the range of the nine averages was 1.6 to 3.4 with a mean of 2.1. An analysis was then done of all responses to each item. This analysis revealed that in 72% of the 144 individual responses, a two or less was given as the response, showing that these qualities appeared sometimes or less often. There were no fives which would have meant that the characteristic was always used, and only 10% of the 144 answers were fours, meaning usually.

When the nine scores on each item were averaged, there were no averages above a three. The rating average on some individual items, such as expressing ideas in written form, having sufficiently developed ideas, using substantial and meaningful content, and spelling correctly, was only 1.7. The item regarding variety of sentence structure and length had the lowest rating at 1.4. Evaluation of these figures

showed that the respondents had indicated that there was definite room for improvement in student writing in regard to the use of these 16 positive qualities.

The second part of the questionnaire included six open-ended questions and two ordered choices. On the question asking what percentage of the students needed additional instruction and development in writing skills, six of the nine respondents chose 90% or 100%. As to the degree to which they needed this help, two circled extreme and five, high.

The last question was an invitation to make any additional comments on observations of written work or on the general subject of student writing. One answer included comments about the students needing to have detailed directions, writing hints, and reminders about grammar in order to do an acceptable job; "without the reminders, however, they revert back to their sloppy writing techniques." This respondent also had a good summary statement: "Effective writing is not a habit with our students."

Causative Analysis

Various causes on multiple levels have brought about such situations. One of the causes revolves around the attitude often held about writing. Emig (1982) discusses

the magical thinking paradigm: "...to believe that children learn because teachers teach and only what teachers explicitly teach is to engage in magical thinking, from a developmental point of view" (p. 135). According to this paradigm, writing has been thought of as a skill to be taught, not as one to be learned. Actually, a skill will be learned best by a doer, a practitioner of the skill, not by a person who is simply told about it or even told how to do it.

This attitude toward writing has led to teacher-centered writing lessons. Since teachers have "taught" writing, it has become their responsibility - teach it, make students do it, grade it, maybe even have students rewrite the teacher's corrections. It has all been part of the teacher's assignment; if it needs to be done better, the teacher needs to improve it! According to Graves (1984), the students have become participants in the writing welfare system. The student does not write for himself but for the teacher and is dependent in regard to time, topic, and criticism. If the writer is given no input into why, when, what, and to whom he writes, why should he care about how he writes? This treatment leads to the creation of dependence in the student. No exploration of student knowledge, student skill, or student ideas takes place. Emig (1982) speaks of North American education as "adults performing before large groups of learners" (p. 125). Under these

conditions, how can the student be expected to take ownership of his work?

This situation is aggravated by a paradox in which many teachers mentally accept the principle of learning by doing but find it very difficult to overcome the methodology which they have been taught. Kamler (1991) states the truth that teachers have been educated to be imparters of knowledge and judges and do not believe that children can learn without their directing the event. A move out of the judge's seat, or from behind the teacher's desk, and into the classroom as a facilitator of learning is needed in many classrooms.

Additionally in writing classrooms, insufficient emphasis has been placed on the teacher's role as a writer. Graves (1990) stresses this need for teachers to discover their own literacy and to write with the students. It is true that teachers have been trained as critics of writing and imparters of knowledge, but the role of the teacher as partaker, participant, and model of the skill offers new perspectives. The Sustained Silent Reading program has utilized the sensible idea of having the teacher, and sometimes the entire staff, model reading. Modeling in writing has been lacking; if the student does not perceive that the teacher values writing and is practicing it, that student is less likely to value it and participate willingly. Christenson (1985) comments that as far as he knew, his English teachers could not write. They taught

lessons about writing from the texts and made corrections on his papers; "But they could not or would not show me how to write" (p. 64).

Actually being involved in writing could also be enlightening to the teacher in a way a textbook cannot match. If teachers expect students to become involved in writing, teachers themselves need to comprehend the type of demands this process makes on a writer. Reading and understanding directions on how to write a persuasive argument (or whatever) is far removed from sitting down to create that written argument. The resulting enlightenment will affect the teacher and her students; students in many writing classrooms have not had this positive influence.

Textbooks, which play an influential role in classrooms but are prepared by textbook companies, often overemphasize the structures of writing, especially by using the strategy of teaching from the part to the whole (Emig, 1982; Warriner, 1982). Lessons based on these textbooks approach writing as a building project; it is necessary to understand the building blocks, the words, and be able to make them into sentences which are then constructed into paragraphs and eventually into compositions. This could be a good idea if a composition or a story were simply a collection of single words, but what about the content of the writing? Is it not "larger" than the individual blocks? The topic, the theme, and the mood are characteristics of the whole, which

are aided by the construction of the parts. The conception of the idea and the mental prewriting are likely to start with the whole; however, minds and people are different and individual in their styles. According to Emig (1982), writers write acceptably in both directions.

The teaching of grammar in isolation is another aspect of proceeding from the part to the whole. Grammar and mechanics are tools needed for the recording of thoughts, but they lose much of their usefulness if studied as separate entities. The Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program actually says that researchers have found that the study of grammar apart from writing can have a negative influence on writing (California Department of Education, 1986, p. 3). Kimrey (1982) makes it personal, telling her former high school and college English teachers that they confused writing with grammar and mechanics and allowed her to finish school falsely believing she could write.

Another problem that has been a contributing cause in writing deficiency is the lack of sufficient emphasis on collaboration in writing. Because of a fear of cheating, teachers often discourage sharing work or helping each other. Atwell (1987) agrees that, because learning was thought to be a solitary activity, collaboration was considered cheating. This has eliminated the value in getting another viewpoint on the work, being able to use the

strengths of another student in addition to those of the teacher, and the excitement of sharing a good, new thought. It also has tended to make writing a solitary, possibly lonely, occupation to be completed quickly, rather than a work to be developed and improved through time and with the input of others. The influence of this factor has been noted by the writer in the graduate classroom; the teacher had difficulty in getting the students to give and accept collaborative help on manuscripts for possible publication. The students had even greater difficulty readjusting their thought and work patterns; old habits were too deeply engrained.

The lack of freedom in collaboration or encouragement from others has, no doubt, strengthened the dislike or even fear many people feel about writing. This apprehension is very real for writers of all ages. Various studies have been done in appraising this fear and its causes and effects (Daly & Miller, 1975a, 1975b; Fox, 1980; Power, Cook, & Meyer, 1979). Smith (1984) states that research clearly shows that apprehension is a factor that must be dealt with in writing classrooms. People fear the unknown - in this case, the unknown regarding a personal skill. Questions about being able to do anything worthwhile, about possibly revealing personal thoughts and feelings, and about making errors and not being perfect accentuate this fear and dislike of putting anything in written form. Daly and

Miller (1975b) make an interesting observation, "No matter how skilled or capable the individual is in writing, if he believes he will do poorly or if he doesn't want to take courses that stress writing then those skills or capabilities matter little" (p. 256).

In alternative schools where failure in various areas is a reality to most students, the apprehension factor is important. Students know what it is to fail and may not want to chance it again. On the other hand, many may hardly believe success is possible, and telling them so is not enough.

The school did not have an organized, school-wide writing program; individual teachers planned the writing for their own classes. In general, teachers had tended to avoid too many writing assignments for several reasons. Class size was not small, as might be expected in an alternative school, and the teacher's job was quite demanding, even without the extra burden of numerous writing papers to grade. The predicament would also arise about whether to require the student to do something he could not do well, or even acceptably, or to make the assignment something he could accomplish. If one did decide to follow the first route, consideration must be taken of the fact that making a perceivable and lasting difference in writing skills is not a simple matter nor does it have a quick remedy.

This explanation reveals that the writing that had occurred had been mainly in teacher-centered settings, with the possible exception of journalism. Much of this writing had tended to be rather sporadic, and students had not had what Atwell (1985a) calls "all the options available to real-world authors" - daily writing time, conferencing, opportunities to draft, revise, and publish, or decisions as to what, why, and for whom they write (p. 35). It seemed there had not been real-world goals for their writing, few goals even beyond the teacher's desk. There had been some goals of creative expression and sharing of feelings and thoughts in journals, but they did not usually lead further. Writing was mainly used as a tool for getting grades or as a practice for life, not as a real-life skill to use in the present and to carry into the future.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

The literature related to writers, writing, and writing classes is abundant. Because of a lack felt in the teaching of writing, changes have been taking place in this field just as changes have been occurring in education in general. Some of these changes in writing procedures follow the restructuring themes that are influencing the whole arena of education. The process-learning approach, student-centered classrooms, and changes in the roles of teachers are issues

that have received and are receiving attention in public education, and in writing classes, as a result of felt needs.

A major issue has been the need for a shift in emphasis from the writing product to writing as a process. Teachers have too often assigned the writing, collected the products, graded them, and returned them to students who looked only at the grade; very little thought or recognition was given to the process or even to methods of improving the product. Murray (1982) remarks that English teachers have been trained by studying a product, written literature, so they expect their students to produce similar products. Students cannot do that, and when teachers dissect the students' products, they usually confirm what the writer already thought of his work and himself - not much.

Individual differences in writing approach and style have not always been taken into consideration. Rodrigues (1985) expresses the belief that "...there is no such thing as the writing process: there are writing processes. Different writers write in different ways" (p. 25). Another misunderstanding that has caused problems is the fact that many teachers who accept the writing process insist that it is a linear process: the steps, such as prewriting, writing, and revising, must always follow each other in order (Emig, 1982; Rodrigues, 1985). Writers, however, do not always use the same order; the process even appears to be

recursive. A writer van also vary in his personal style from day to day (Graves, 1984).

The question of a teacher-centered or student-centered classroom presents an interesting enigma. The teacher should have the education and be capable of imparting knowledge, but the challenge is finding strategies that will bring about real learning for the students, not just an exposure to subject matter. Students must be involved experientially in the planning and production of meaningful writing to really acquire the skill. Otherwise, the classroom will run on what Knudson (1988) calls the presentational/frontal mode with the teacher telling the students what to do and the student imitating what has been presented.

The issue of teacher role is also directly involved here. As in most situations, some people have carried this issue to extremes, causing new hindrances to learning. Calkins (1986) and Newkirk (1990) both discuss the possibility of the teacher becoming too separated from the imparting of information. Calkins (1986) says that due to the fear of taking responsibility away from the students, some teachers have avoided teaching. In order to balance the student/teacher relations, "Ideally, both teachers and students should bring all of their skills, wisdom, and energy to the teaching-learning transaction. We should not

relinquish our identities as teachers in order to give students ownership of their craft" (p. 165).

Another detriment to written expression is that teachers can be so busy working for the students and with the students that they forget that students are people with interests and lives beyond school. Pharness and Weinstein (1991) realized that for the students to enter into disclosure through writing, teachers need to accept the value of the students' lives and become concerned about what they know, rather than putting so much stress on what they do not know. Sitting in the classroom are boys and girls who are "experts" on things they may be afraid to share because they might seem silly or unimportant. Writing class is a great time for the teacher to be the learner, maybe even finding out why her car is making that funny, klunking noise.

Schools often have problems finding the materials or programs which will accomplish the objectives they desire for their students. Problems can originate from the fact that the available materials do not fit the situation or from a mismatch of research and classroom need. Atwell (1985b) speaks of her school trying to find good writing solutions through strategies and philosophies that avoided the issues of what writing is and why writers write. She also discusses the fact that experimental research design seldom has much effect on what really happens in writing

classrooms. It concentrates on teachers and methods, ignoring student writing behaviors (Atwell, 1982).

Teachers understand the fact that programs or texts designed or adopted by non-teaching researchers and educators often do not fit what is actually happening in the classroom. The classroom teachers should not be excluded in the choice of writing programs or procedures for the school. These people have the knowledge not only of what is likely to work, but also of what they can or will really implement. Many new programs handed down to the classroom teacher for implementation have died behind the closed door because the person in charge inside had not bought into the idea.

Writing is an important skill for academic work, but that is really just a beginning. Writing skill is valuable in many jobs and professions and the deficiency of skill is costing our country dearly. Linden and Whimbey (1990) quote some striking facts:

> In a Boston Globe article, Professor Chall of Harvard reveals that over half of the adults in this country are unqualified for today's technical jobs because of their lack of reading and writing skills....The inability of our schools to prepare students adequately for employment is forcing American businesses to spend $25 billion a year teaching employees basic skills. (pp. 1-2)

The factors discussed have been and are causes for the lack of writing skill in and out of schools today. Graves (1984) says people have the desire to write, but studies show that many people use writing only when they cannot accomplish the needed task in any other way. They do not perceive themselves as writers for they do not think that they have anything of value to say. Clark (1987) has a shorter, more poignant message to teachers, "Yet most children do not write for one simple reason: no one asks them to" (p. 3).

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

The following goals and behavioral objectives were projected for this practicum.

Goals and Expectations

Students will possess writing skills that are adequate to permit them to communicate with clarity of purpose, organization of thought, and precision of structure and mechanics, in both school and life activities that demand such skill. They will have the capability of expressing concepts and feelings correctly in various forms of written communication. Their perceptions of themselves as writers will show an increase and their apprehension and antipathy toward writing will decrease.

Behavioral Objectives

By the end of the implementation period, the following achievements will be attained.

1. English students in groups one and two will demonstrate improvement in writing quality (i.e., in terms of focus,

content, organization, style, and conventions) as shown by an increase of 1.20 in the mean level on the follow-up writing assessment, using the Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Holistic Scoring Guide. In addition, at least 40% of the samples in the follow-up writing assessment will be assessed with a 4.0 or above, and less than 20% will be assessed below 3.0.

2. Students will demonstrate the ability to do written communication for various purposes and for real audiences, as substantiated by the diversity and quality of portfolio work and the accomplishment of projects of student choice.

3. Students will demonstrate the degree of their participation in writing activities by the quantity and quality of written work collected in the portfolios and through the entries in their student logs.

4. Students will reveal evidence of change toward a better perception of themselves as writers, as shown by the differences in attitude seen in an analysis of pre- and post-evaluations of themselves as writers, administered both in a peer-interview format and as a self-evaluation, written in response to the Perception Survey sheet (see Appendix B).

5. Students will show a decrease in apprehension and antipathy toward writing through a 15-point increase in the mean score on the Measurement of Writing Apprehension instrument (Daly & Miller, 1975a).

6. Students will demonstrate an increase in positive

attitude toward writing through this increase in the mean score on the Measurement Of Writing Apprehension and by the degree of participation in and enthusiasm for writing activities as documented by student logs and the class progress journal.

7. Organization of the writing program will be documented by a progress journal and by the other class records, such a portfolios and student logs.

8. Teacher will demonstrate development as a writer through completion of conference courses and at least one submission for publication, as well as by modeling in the writers' workshops and facilitating student growth in writing.

Measurement of Objectives

Several types of measurement were utilized to evaluate the different facets of writing development. Pre- and post-assessment of student writing samples were used to demonstrate improvement in writing skills. The writing samples were based on the prompt from the Vermont Uniform Writing Assessment. They were assessed according to the Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Holistic Scoring Guide. An increase in the group mean of 1.20 was expected. The pre-assessment was conducted during the first and second week of school, and the post-assessment was held during the week following implementation. Each paper was assigned a number

to insure anonymity during assessment, and a list of the names was retained for possible individual comparisons.

Apprehension and attitude were appraised through use of the Measurement of Writing Apprehension (Day & Miller, 1975a, p. 246). This instrument was used as a pretest during the first weeks of school and as a posttest after the implementation.

In order to evaluate the students' perceptions of themselves as writers, two approaches were used. Pairs of students interviewed each other about how each perceived writing and himself as a writer. Before the interviews, each class, as a group, prepared their interview questions. Each interview was recorded by the interviewer and kept for later comparison. These records established a base for identification of changes in perception when the interviews were repeated after the end of the implementation.

As the second evaluation of peception, each student wrote two or three paragraphs describing his perceptions of himself in relation to writing and his writing skills. These papers were written in response to the Perception Survey sheet, compiled by the teacher (see Appendix B), which contains eight positive/negative choice statements and four open-ended questions. They were done both at the beginning and at the end of the implementation.

During the course of the workshops, each student created a writing portfolio. These portfolios served as

additional assessment for the practicum, as set forth in the objectives; in addition, they were the basis of evaluation needed for semester grades.

Records maintained throughout implementation also aided in the assessment. The students, as part of their working folders, kept logs recording the pieces turned in to be edited and the editing conferences; also in those folders were sheets for recording skills discussed during these conferences. The teacher kept a practicum journal, in which she recorded her observations and comments during the project; this journal also includes discussion of the unexpected events that occurred, principally a major hurricane. Another journal, the class progress journal, contains happenings in the writers' workshops, interesting comments or attitudes expressed during classes, and whatever was appropos to the progress of the workshops. These journals added dimension to the reporting of the implementation and may even open publication possibilities.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Possible Solutions

Students in the school were deficient in the writing ability needed to express themselves skillfully and adequately. Assessment of writing samples and questionnaires completed by the teachers indicated that the detrimental effects of this lack in writing skills appeared in most all classes, but English classes provided the most likely base for diagnosis and improvement of the problem. It was seen that students in English classes were deficient in the writing skills that would allow them to express ideas and concepts clearly in the various types of written communication they use as students and also need for the future.

Deficiency in writing ability is not a new problem, but new methods of remedying it seem to be receiving attention as the problems of illiteracy and the lack of language fluency in this country are making demands on education. Teachers have taught writing for a long time, but the question is whether students have been learning writing. What actually has been taught? What has been learned?

One long-standing approach to the need for writing skills has been through the teaching of grammar and mechanics - how to use subject-verb agreement, how to write a sentence, how to capitalize and punctuate correctly. Some teachers, and textbooks, evidently have believed that if a person understood how to do these steps correctly, he could use the details to create a whole product. In this part-to-whole approach, the product was considered an accumulation of the enlarging skills; students learned words to make them into sentences, practiced sentences and then combined them into paragraphs, which later became stories or essays. Panman and Panman (1960) follow this pattern in their workbook-style text, Writing Basics: Sentence to Paragraph to Essay.

Another approach is that students will learn to write if they write a great deal. Sayings such as "Learning is doing" and "You learn to write by writing" sound quite impressive and do offer a partial view of the truth. Most students do need to write more than they are presently writing in their classes, but more than an increase in quantity is required.

Mina Shaughnessy discusses a model that she liked - giving a series of major, highly structured assignments and introducing them by lecture and written descriptions (Halpern & Mathews, 1980). She would then use lessons on description or sentence structure in ways that got the

students involved in strategies that they could apply to their own work.

Freewriting is a strategy that can be used in different ways. Elbow (1973) stresses it as a necessity to improve writing - to get thoughts on paper uninterrupted. In contrast to speaking, editing plays a major part in writing. Afraid to be incorrect, the writer starts and stops and corrects until he is discouraged about ever writing anything. "The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly....Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something..." (Elbow, 1973, p. 3).

A little different approach to freewriting is using it to help students get ideas down on paper for later classroom discussion. According to Wooldridge and Weber (1990) freewriting can be used to engender critical thinking and writing by helping students share ideas and by stimulating discussion of these ideas.

Clark (1987) set up and managed a classroom similar to a newsroom with students as reporters. He basically treated writing as a process, having students write every day, as journalists would do and holding conferences to help them through the process.

The changeover from emphasizing the product of writing to emphasizing the process goes far beyond the writings of

one author. "An effective writing program treats writing as a process, a concept which regards the act of writing as an interrelated series of creative activities" (California Department of Education, 1986, p. 2). That writing is a process is quite accepted in the literature; however, authors do differ as to how they break down this process.

Murray (1982) talks of three stages, at one point referring to them as prewriting, writing, and rewriting. He later uses new terms, prevision, vision, and revision, to stress the process of discovery through writing. Graves (1984) names the steps found in his studies of how children write, Topic Choice, Rehearsal, Composing, Reading, Revision. The Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program lists eight stages (California Department of Education, 1986). The point, of course, is not the number of stages or steps, but the fact that there is now considered to be "...a process, that writing is not magic - or is rarely magic - but the result of a series of logical, cognitive, and affective activities that can be understood, and, therefore, learned" (Murray, 1982, p. 3).

Using the analogies of learning to ski and learning to make pottery, Christenson (1985) suggests that demonstration is an excellent teaching strategy. If one has seen how to do something and then tries it, involvement in the learning is real. It also becomes vital to be open to advice given for the improvement of the skill. With his students,

Christenson discusses procedures for the writing and then they all write and share. Becoming a better writer himself, publishing, establishing authority as a teacher able to do as he tells students to do all came from this involvement in being a writer, not only a writing teacher.

Writers' workshops (writing workshops) are receiving attention because they offer a strategy leading away from the teacher-centered classroom to one in which responsibility is given to the students for their own learning. Atwell (1987) says they make time for students to work on their writing and for teachers to work with students on their writing. Atwell has a lot to say about the writing workshop, but she admits that the change did not come easily to her. "I believed my structures and strictures were necessary for kids to write well....I believed my ideas were more valuable than any my student might possibly entertain" (Atwell, 1985a, p. 35). Bunce-Crim (1991) discusses the fact that writers' workshops make provision for a safe environment that encourages risk-taking in written expression.

Calkins (1986) speaks concerning one aspect of the writing workshop - the mini-lesson. She finds that the short lesson with the group at the beginning of class adds unity to the workshop. She cautions that when teachers hear the word lesson they tend to overreact, and she strongly suggests that it not become a maxi-lesson. It should give a

quick tip or add a little useful information to be taken by those students who are ready for it that day and possibly stored in the minds of those who aren't.

The Foxfire magazine and ensuing projects grew out of Eliot Wigginton's desire to meet the needs of his students, not just give them something to do. Wigginton (1992) stated that he did not oppose the state curriculum but wanted student work to express what real people do with the curriculum knowledge in the real world. After discovering where and how reading and writing are used in the real world, students voted on what they would do and planned the steps they would take to do it (Wigginton, 1991).

His students surely fulfilled the section of the position statement of the National Council of Teachers of English (1985), stating that students should be encouraged to use writing as a way to learn as well as a method of reporting. Working together they learned skills that they never would have known otherwise and produced much more than they could have done separately - and, no doubt, much more that Wigginton ever expected.

In dealing with these varied ideas related to improving writing ability, it became evident that many of them had applicable concepts to the problem under discussion, but all were not usable as presented.

The teaching of grammar as an isolated subject does not usually bring about desired results. Linden and Whimbey

(1990) call grammar the ineffectual monster, adding that textbooks continue to stress the study of grammar, even though 50 years of research have revealed it is not beneficial. Writing classes overemphasizing grammar facts as a step to future writing may not accomplish much because most students will not adequately perceive the whole picture through these isolated facts and will lose interest. However, if approached differently and studied within context when the student needs clarity and precision for his work, grammar and mechanics are useful and very essential tools.

In responding to the practice of quantity writing, the Handbook for Planning an Effective Writing Program (California Department of Education, 1986) says that engaging in writing does not, on its own, guarantee a positive change in quality. Writing in quantity will not automatically bring the improvement students need. Practicing a sport or a skill without appropriate instruction has a very limited effect on mastering that skill; a certain amount is usually learned by trial and error, but progress is slow and has definite boundaries. Children need to write much and often, but that is not sufficient. Emig (1982) explains, "The processes of writing can be enhanced by working in, and with, a group of other writers,...who give vital response, including advice" (p. 141).

The model Mina Shaughnessy describes, with its class size of 15 and its in-class tutors, was primarily designed for college use. The lecture and the written assignment descriptions seem to fit that setting better than high school, but her approach to grammar and usage lessons was very interesting and could be adapted. She comments, "...you're involved in grammar, but you're involved with it at a level that has a payoff for the students" (Halpern & Mathews, 1980, p. 37). Sounds good!

Freewriting seemed useful for certain situations, used as an exercise, not a main emphasis. Its use would probably tend to lean more to the suggestions of Wooldridge and Weber (1990) than to the more personal use advanced by Elbow (1973), which even leads to the teacherless class.

Clark's newsroom model did not personally appeal to this writer, but the strategies he used, including process writing and conferencing, were of interest.

The remaining models - process writing, the teacher as writer and model, the writers' workshop including mini-lessons among its many aspects, and projects of student choice - presented strategies that were appropriate, exciting, and useful to improving writing ability in an alternative school. They became the main thrust of the solution. The selected or adapted ideas from the first five models were part of these main strategies or could be added

to them. Together the main models and the selected ideas combined to create the practicum solution.

Rodrigues (1985) speaks of the idea of combining methodology and suggests the term, pluralization of the writing curriculum. He favors bringing various techniques together with the teaching of process approaches to writing.

Description of Selected Solution

The solution centered upon the initiation and operation of writers' workshops, utilizing process writing, modification of teacher role, and projects of student choice. Through these strategies and the many facets of the writers' workshop itself, improvement in writing ability should take place, accompanied by a decrease in writing apprehension. Through study during the previous two years, the writer had come to realize the educational need for changes in classroom procedures and in teacher role. The writers' workshop, with the accompanying strategies, brought about changes from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered one. By giving the students an active part in the curriculum and ownership of their own work, there appeared to be an increase in motivation. Motivation is important for the improvement of writing skills, and it is especially so in this school because lack of motivation is among the student descriptors for enrollment in the school.

The writers' workshops were operative in the same room for both sections of the target group, groups one and two. Each group contained approximately 25 students and met separately for writers' workshop. The workshop consisted of three, 90-minute periods a week.

There were a number of aspects involved in the operation of the workshop. Of course, the main idea was for much writing to take place in an environment that encouraged participation and allowed for risk-taking. Blocks of time were available for following the steps of process writing at the desired pace and in the order that was suitable to each author. Swoger (1989) stresses this necessity to have time in school to write and read among fellow learners.

Atwell (1987) states, "...I learned how a standard sequential curriculum, no matter what the sequence, puts limits on kids' learning by mandating that everyone learn the same one thing at a time" (p. 116). Even though there is process in process writing, every writer does not follow exactly the same steps or use them in the same order (Rodrigues, 1985).

Another aspect of the workshop was the stress on students' ownership of their work. There were two basic ways through which this was developed; the first was open topic choice. Atwell (1985a), commenting about the critical difference student choice makes, says that, rather than eliminating structure, it makes the student responsible for

his own structuring. Also influencing this acceptance of ownership was the student choice of projects. Wigginton (1992) wanted kids, through the projects, to do something of substance that would be what real people do with curriculum in the real world. This part of the solution developed as the students became involved in deciding what projects would best ensure recognition of their work.

The other factor that enhanced ownership was conferencing, both with the teacher and with peers. Through conferencing, the students collaborated about their work, getting the advantage of each other's knowledge for the improvement of drafts. Kamler (1990) cautions that it is more necessary to deal with meaning than with form.

The schedule of the workshop generally followed the lesson plan shared by Atwell (1987): Mini-lesson, Status-of-the-Class Conference, Write/Confer, Group Share (p. 92). These four happenings were to allow for adding any desired writing tips to the day, knowing what each student was working on, writing by students and teacher, checking in with the students' progress, and sharing work as a class. The mini-lesson covered a variety of topics, such as the importance of ideas to a writer, the use of conversation to enliven a piece, the sneaky words <u>their</u>, <u>there</u>, and <u>they're</u>, or the need to stress content in conferencing. The Status-of-the-Class became the State-of-the-Class, and the form for recording their plans for the day went through some

evolution until the arrangement fit the class format. Group Share was easy to bypass because people would be busy, and sharing seemed rather difficult for many of these students. Sharing one's work, however, is something that needs to be started easily, if necessary, and then increased, but definitely continued. The workshop procedures offered a variety of ways to emphasize the writing process. Bunce-Crim (1991) underlines their value, "If students are to become writers, they must be active participants in the writing process, conversing with each other, raising questions, making decisions, and evaluating themselves" (p. 38).

An issue of the practicum and the implementation was the teacher as a writer and a model of writing, as well as a facilitator of student growth in writing. Emig (1982) emphasizes that teachers of writing should be writers if they are to be both sensitive and sensible in helping others learn to write. She makes the point that teaching writing developmentally will require transformation in the teacher; it demands that those wishing to help others learn to write must be writers and learners themselves.

The solution was a multi-faceted one with the goal of reaching many students through their interests, on their levels of development, and with their willing involvement. Calkins (1991) comments wisely, "...when we give the children of the world the words they need, we are giving them life and growth and refreshment" (p. 24).

Report of Action Taken

The time frame of the implementation was expanded somewhat due to various circumstances, thereby encompassing the period of June, 1992 through February, 1993. There were multiple steps in bringing the practicum to completion. As of June 1, a grant application was submitted for project support. During June, the teacher was educated as she attended a conference for writers, the Write-to-Publish Conference, to increase self-awareness in the field. Preparation and collection of materials was then done along with the delineation of all procedures for the operation of the workshops; this preparation included getting the Status-of-the-Class forms, student folders, logs, and portfolios ready for the formative evaluation.

From July 6 to July 24, during summer school, a formative evaluation of the procedures and materials was carried out as a mini-workshop in another alternative center, a detention residence for boys. The location, the students' attitudes about life and school, and the staff's methods of operation created an extremely challenging place to test a writers' workshop. It did provide for trial of the forms and procedures, as well as of the teacher's patience and fortitude. The evaluation involved an assessment of the happenings during that time period and of procedures and materials to see what was satisfactory and

what needed improvement. Lessons were learned about changes needed, but possibly the greatest lesson learned by the writer was in the value of persistence. Called-for adjustments were noted in the use of the student log to make it less cumbersome over the longer implementation and in a method for grading the Measurement of Writing Apprehension.

The gathering of equipment and the physical setting-up of the writer's regular classroom for the workshops were disrupted by two events, one minor in the light of the other. The plans for the purchase of equipment and materials for the classroom were derailed when the grant was not accepted. But previous to that, Hurricane Andrew had turned much of the county, the school year, and the writer's house and life into turmoil. Life changes were abrupt and greatly complicated the task of keeping everything moving in the right direction at a reasonable pace.

Initiation of the writers' workshops in the alternative high school began in the middle of September, when school began - two weeks late. The creation of writing samples for the pre-assessment took place during the first two weeks of school. The two different forms of the evaluation of perception and part of the pretesting with the Measurement of Writing Apprehension were completed during weeks two and three; part of the Apprehension pretesting was completed later because of absences and other distractions.

In addition, during September daily workshop strategies and procedures were put into operation. The habit of classroom use of student working folders and logs was initiated. Students made a topic bank for their own use through brainstorming and some personal interviewing.

The planning of projects was delayed and took a somewhat different course, but students made decisions and choices for publishing and sharing projects that make it possible for them to achieve recognition of their work. The actual writing content of the workshops developed as they progressed, due to the factor of student choice in writing topics, audiences, and projects. The daily operation of the workshop basically stayed the same in format throughout October, November, December, and January, and was allowed to extend into the first two weeks of February.

During the third week of February, student writing samples were again done for the post-assessment, and the posttest of the Measurement of Writing Apprehension was given. The two forms of perception evaluation were repeated, with the students using their original interview questions and the Perception Survey sheets. These events were followed by the summative evaluation and the practicum report.

The assistant principal was extremely interested in the writers' workshops and was supportive of what the teacher was trying to accomplish; she even offered help, after the

disappointment regarding the grant, by providing a carpet for the meeting area and other supplies. The physical conditions for the implementation were generally good; the room was bright and large enough to allow an arrangement of the desks and the bookcases for the best operation of the workshop. A request was honored for desks and chairs to replace the one-piece desks in the room. With these, it was possible to arrange the desks into work areas around the carpet, which was used for group meetings. Conference areas were made by placing the bookcases at 90-degree angles to the wall.

The final touch belonged to the students - students who appeared thankful to have the opportunity to say in writing what they had to say, rather than what the teacher wanted them to say on any given day. Murray (1982) expresses his belief, "Students will write well only when they speak in their voice, and that voice can only be authoritative and honest when the student speaks of his own concerns in his own way" (p. 129).

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results

In the alternative high school which was the work setting for the practicum, students were deficient in the writing ability needed to express themselves skillfully and adequately. The assessment of student writing samples and the completion of a questionnaire by the faculty/staff indicated that, in most classes, teachers experienced difficulty in getting the students to do written work that made its point clearly and correctly, and English classes provided the most likely base for diagnosis and improvement of the problem. It was seen that students in English classes were deficient in the writing skills that would allow them to express ideas and concepts clearly in the various types of written communication they use as students and also need for the future.

The implemented solution centered on the initiation and operation of writers' workshops, utilizing process writing, modification of the teacher's role, and projects of student choice. The main idea was for much writing to take place in an environment that encouraged participation and allowed for

risk-taking; blocks of time were made available for following the steps of process writing at a pace and order suitable to each author. The solution also emphasized student ownership of work and a student-centered classroom.

Results of the implementation are reported in their relation to the behavioral objectives projected for this practicum. Objective one stated that English students in groups one and two will demonstrate improvement in writing quality (i.e., in terms of focus, content, organization, style, and conventions) as shown by an increase of 1.20 in the mean level on the follow-up writing assessment, using the Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Holistic Scoring Guide. In addition, at least 40% of the samples in the follow-up writing assessment will be assessed with a 4.0 or above, and less than 20% will be assessed below 3.0.

The compilation and comparison of the data from the assessment of the writing samples did not show an increase in writing quality as expected; rather a slight decrease was noted in this comparison. The mean of the pre-assessment was 3.59, and the post-assessment mean was 3.51. Table 1 and Table 2 contrast the score distributions of the pre-assessment and the post-assessment. Table 2 shows that 31% of the follow-up writing samples were assessed with a 4.0 or above, while only 11% of the samples were assessed below 3.0. A definite positive change was seen in the lower part of the assessment range.

TABLE 1

Score Distribution of Pre-Assessment Samples

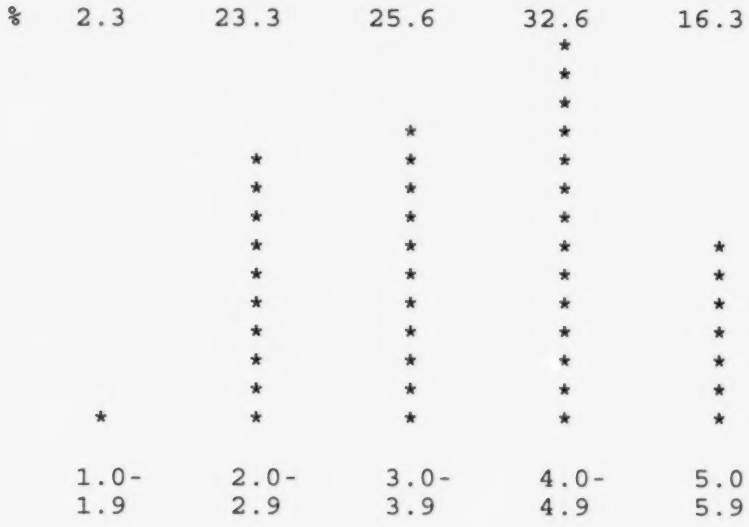
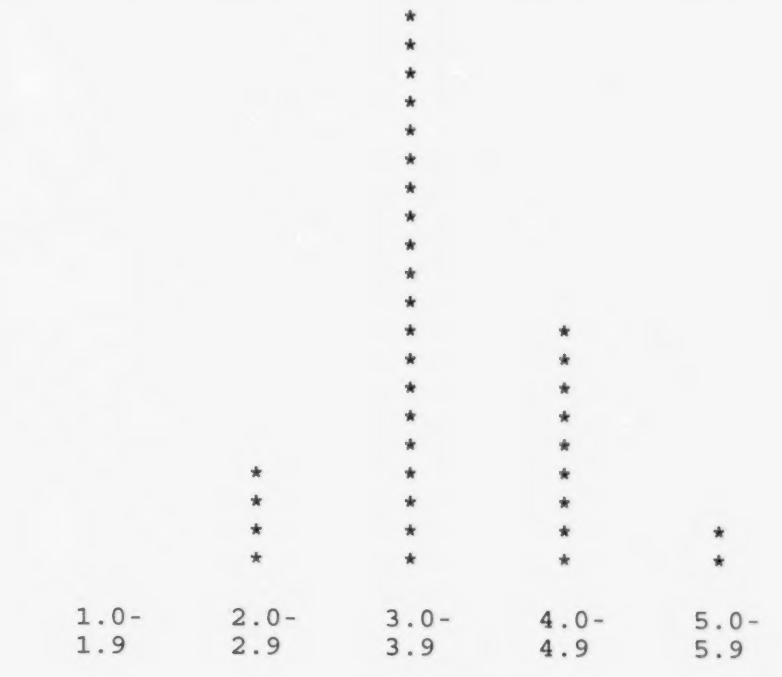


TABLE 2

Score Distribution of Post-Assessment Samples



Objective two stated that students will demonstrate the ability to do written communication for various purposes and for real audiences, as substantiated by the diversity and quality of portfolio work and the accomplishment of projects of student choice. The work in the portfolios included nonsense and serious poetry, short stories, personal experiences, opinion and topic papers, and even a manual for Police Explorer recruitment. The students worked together to choose and plan projects to disseminate their work. The teacher was very pleased when, in their planning, they went beyond her expectation that they would choose a method of publishing. They have four branches in their plan for sharing their work: (a) Publishing booklets of their work, (b) Displaying their work in the classroom for others to read, (c) Exchanging their work with other classes and schools, (d) Reading work chosen from the portfolios on the daily announcements. Each branch of the plan has a committee assigned, and branch four has begun by reading work on the announcements during Black History month. These projects will continue through the school year. In addition, the student who created the Police Explorer manual has submitted it to his superiors for acceptance as a recruitment tool for schools.

Objective three stated that students will demonstrate the degree of their participation in writing activities by the quantity and quality of written work collected in the

portfolios and through the entries in their student logs. A great deal of writing has been produced, occasioning a problem for the editor (teacher) in keeping up with the number of pieces written. The student logs were part of their working folders, and in them were recorded the pieces turned in to be edited. The logs could not be objectively assessed because students had free choice of topic and length, and students were in the workshops for varying lengths of time due to enrollment fluctation. However, some logs indicated quite active writers, and 8 of the 32 checked recorded 15 or more pieces turned in for editing.

Objective four stated that students will reveal evidence of change toward a better perception of themselves as writers, as shown by the differences in attitude seen in an analysis of pre- and post-evaluations of themselves as writers, administered both in a peer-interview format and as a self-evaluation, written in response to the Perception Survey sheet (see Appendix B). As stated in the proposal, information regarding the changes discovered in the students' perceptions of themselves as writers required a subjective evaluation due to the nature of collection. First of all, it was interesting to see how students reacted to the idea of perceiving one's self as a writer. Some said they saw themselves as writers because they enjoy writing or can express themselves in writing while others evidently took it more formally. They are part of the group Graves

(1984) describes, "Real writing, they seem to think, is reserved for the professional" (pp. 62-63).

One girl was a good illustration of something the teacher wanted to see happen. In the pre-assessment, she commented that she did not see herself as a writer because she had never had any literary training, even though she said she spent time writing when not required to do so and enjoyed it. However, on the post-assessment, she stated that she saw herself as a writer to the extent of her own things but not as one who wants to share her work with others; she is very comfortable as a writer because she likes to write down her feelings and problems. Great! The concept has changed - a writer is one who writes; the sharing will probably come in time.

There were students who perceived themselves as writers in both the pre- and post-assessments, and in most cases rightly so. Others did not perceive themselves as writers in either assessment, one admitting that writing is work, and she hates work! One came just a little closer to being a writer, when in the post-assessment, he added to his comment, "Writing to me is not fun," the concession that it's not too bad, either.

Then there were those who made a definite statement of change; they had not perceived themselves as writers previously, but now they could. As an example, one girl moved from not really seeing herself as a writer because

"there are times when I just don't feel right with what I'm writing" to seeing herself as a writer because she can express her feelings easily. Two students who had given negative replies in the pre-assessment made follow-up responses that were encouraging; one sees himself as a beginner writer, and the other said, "I see myself as a writer, but I'm not good enough." That acknowledgement is good ground for growth.

Objective five stated that students will show a decrease in apprehension and antipathy toward writing through a 15-point increase in the mean score on the Measurement of Writing Apprehension instrument (Daly & Miller, 1975a). The compilation of data from the pre- and post-use of this instrument did show an increase in the mean score, to a lesser degree. The mean score increased in a positive direction by 2.6. Interestingly, the difference in the median scores was almost the same, with a positive move from 90 to 92.5. In looking at individual comparisons, it was found that six individuals made appreciable increases, ranging from 13 to 30 points, toward a positive attitude toward writing.

Objective six stated that students will demonstrate an increase in positive attitude toward writing through this increase in the mean score on the Measurement of Writing Apprehension and by the degree of participation in and enthusiasm for writing activities as documented by student

logs and the class progress journal. The increase in the scores in the Measurement of Writing Apprehension has been noted, as has the information relating to the student logs. One student's comments may add to these evaluations. On a pre-assessment perception survey, she had said, "I do enjoy writing, but I'm not that good, and its [sic] hard on me". In the later survey, the answer was, "I enjoy my writing, to the point where I can't wait to have class."

A progress journal entry from January reveals a pleasant experience. About 15 minutes before the end of class, a girl said, "It's time to go." The teacher felt she wanted the class to be excused a little early. She really meant that she was surprised that it was so late, and she appeared shocked at herself that she had been <u>enjoying</u> what she was doing. Another entry told of someone complaining about writing so much that she'd never write again (because her hand was worn out)! The teacher reminded her that she had a good portfolio and was doing better. She responded, "Yes, I feel so much freer."

Objective seven stated that organization of the writing program will be documented by a progress journal and by the other class records, such as portfolios and student logs. The progress journal was kept by the teacher and documents the initiation and continuation of the workshops. It also contains some notes from the assistant principal related to students' work. One regards a piece titled "Unconditional

Love," written by a student with learning difficulties. The note says, "This is so touching. It is also a tribute to your writing program that he could feel safe enough to attempt this piece!" A main idea of the solution was the building of such an environment. The student logs were in the students' working folders and were used to record work to be edited; the portfolios were the storage place for student work which had been finalized after the editing.

Finally, objective eight stated that the teacher will demonstrate development as a writer through completion of conference courses and at least one submission for publication, as well as by modeling in the writers' workshops and facilitating student growth in writing. The writer did attend, complete, and thoroughly enjoy the Write-to-Publish Conference, as planned. She attended sessions dealing with topics such as how to get published, finding your niche as a writer, and the basis on which we have a right to be read. It was an inspiring and educational experience, and information received there provided sources for two of the three pieces submitted for possible publication. Extensive modeling was difficult, partly because of the many demands of the classroom. The teacher did model, however, and also shared information about her methods of writing with the classes, even bringing messy rough drafts to class to show how it really is. The drafts were also used to springboard a discussion of sequencing.

Discussion

Various factors were influential in the development and results of this practicum. As previously mentioned, a major event that could seem unrelated to the implementation of the practicum had real influence on its progression. The hurricane in late August had devastating effects on the lives of the people involved and on the development of the school year in general. This is not easy to explain, and all the effects are probably not even realized by those people, but the writer knows it has not been a normal time for her, as for many others.

In relation to the lack of an increase in the writing sample assessment, it seems hard to believe that the decrease shown actually represents reality. The quality of the post-assessment could have been influenced by several factors. It is possible that the methodology of the writing sample assessment may not fit the workshop format well. When they wrote the post-assessment, the students had been participating in the workshops for several months; the workshop plan discourages writing a piece and turning it in before it is peer-conferenced and perhaps reworked at least once. In the assessment, the teacher did encourage self-conferencing and revising as needed but did not permit peer-conferencing because it did not seem appropriate for an assessment.

The taking of one sample may be an unfair way of judging a skill like writing; the timing, the conditions, and the attitudes of all involved can have too great an influence on a one-day performance. Perhaps for both the pre- and post-assessment, it would have been better to ask the students to write samples on two different days and average these scores for the assessment ratings. This might have presented a more accurate picture of each student's ability.

The time factor of the implementation must also be considered. The months that the workshops have been in operation have served as a good beginning, and the workshop format will be continued throughout the school year. The changes in behavior and writing quality are also in beginning stages and will continue as good writers' skills do. The final assessments for the school year in June will, doubtless, show additional improvement in writing ability.

This period of time has brought interest in the workshops, changes in attitude, and improvements in writing that do not all show on the assessment. A social studies teacher commented one day that she had seen a change in writing in the section of the target group that she taught. She had previously had the students do most of their work orally or in projects to avoid penalizing them for their poor writing ability. She said that it was obvious to her that the writing program was making a difference in her

classes; the students were more organized in their writing, gave clear examples, and were not afraid of details and description.

The assistant principal also commented that she had noticed a difference in the notes some of the workshop students had written to her. They seemed more willing to write lengthy and detailed explanations - and excuses!

To assess student attitudes toward the writers' workshops, the teacher asked for their opinions. An overwhelming majority said they really liked the workshop format for writing class. They liked it because "...you're free to write what you want to write about"; "...I enjoy the challenge of making up my own topics and setting my own guidelines"; "...you use your mind and feelings"; "...I have learned a lot about writing and I don't have the nervous feeling about publishing my work because I've learned to share my work with others." When asked about the parts they liked and disliked, something they did not like was sitting on the carpet for the mini-lessons. Many expressed approval of the ability to choose their own topics. Other encouraging remarks included "I wouldn't have my writing class any other way"; "Nothing should change"; "I don't really have any dislikes to say about our writing class. I feel it's moving at a good pace." But the most surprising comment came from a girl who illustrates her sincerity by her work in class; she said that the only thing she dislikes

about workshop is that it only lasts an hour and a half!

The unfolding of the project plans will likely add to the interest and quality of the workshops. The concept should have been introduced earlier, but when it was, it was still difficult to get the students to respond and take ownership of the planning. A shift, from trying to generate suggestions in the large group to small-group brainstorming, finally got some action. After presentation of the brainstorming results back to the large group, a committee decided on the four possibilities described. Instead of voting on the best one, the group accepted all four and the four-branch project plan was adopted. Implementation of it has begun and will continue through the rest of the year.

The projection of a 15-point increase in the Measurement of Writing Apprehension had to be an arbitrary choice since the writer had not used the instrument previously. The goal was probably somewhat high, at least for the period of time involved.

In the writer's opinion, the solution was a good one for these English classes in the alternative school. It has filled a gap that existed because of the lack of an organized writing program for these students. Their participation in the writing, the amount of work that has been done, and the improvement in their attitudes and ability, as noted by themselves and others, has made the solution worthwhile. The interest shown by many of the

students in their comments was refreshing, although some of them still do not want to work, at least not too hard. The main idea stated earlier was fulfilled - for much writing to take place in an environment that encouraged participation and allowed for risk-taking.

Recommendations

Time is a vital factor in writing, as writers well know. The writers' workshop deals with writing as a process because it is - a developmental process which needs time. The workshop format is not a treatment, but a strategy and the provision of an environment; it must be an on-going strategy that provides an extended time frame to allow and encourage this process to take place.

Procedures should be kept simple and clear. This writer found that it takes time and repetition to establish the new routines of the workshop. These routines, such as student topic choice and conferencing, should be started immediately, and then followed with consistency and persistence until the students adapt the procedures. They need time to break old habits in writing; they have possibly gotten used to being given their topics and turning in only rough drafts, if they have written much at all. A recent new student wrote, "The reason I don't like the workshop is because I have never had any writing classes in school."

New ideas need time and repetition to become habits.

Accepting ownership of one's work sounds easier than it is. The teacher must be consistent with the students in expecting them to take this responsibility. For teachers, the giving over of that ownership is not simple, either; they must be patient but persistent with themselves as they change their roles and become facilitators of the students' development.

Stressing the importance of the content of the writing pieces must also be started early and emphasized again and again. The idea that the crux of writing ability is the perfect use of grammar and mechanics is a long-standing misconcept. The value of what students have to say is in the ideas and the content of the work. It was difficult to get the students to understand and accept this truth. In this age of technology, however, computers can provide the spelling and the punctuation; students must realize that the value of their work is in their thoughts.

It would be extremely helpful to keep the number of workshops small, at least at the beginning of its use. Having no more than two workshops would be best until the teacher-facilitator becomes comfortable with the procedures. Experienced teachers know that the first time through any new material or strategy is the hardest as it becomes evident which things work well and which do not, and which parts should be repeated, adapted, or discarded. The other

plus in having only one or two workshops is that adequate teacher time is needed for editing and holding editing conferences in order to give students sufficient feedback on their work. The unexpected assignment of a third writing class during this implementation was detrimental in this regard.

Students do need the personal attention that comes through conferencing with the teacher and with their peers. The teacher and the students, in conferencing, need to keep returning to the importance of the content; mechanics are dealt with through editing and the editing conferences. More stress was needed on conferencing in this implementation, and the recommendation is made that the teacher carry a list of questions and responses she could utilize as she passes around the room to share student work. Atwell (1987) lists possible questions for the teacher's use. Lists of suggested questions and procedures for peer conferencing could be posted in conference areas or kept in student folders to remind them to emphasize content, rather than just spelling and punctuation.

In the evaluation of perception as a writer, it hardly seemed necessary to have two methods of evaluation. Rather than using the interview format, an oral discussion could be used to activate the students' thinking about what such perception means. The Perception Survey could then be used; with it the student assesses and expresses himself and does

not feel called upon to perform for the benefit of the interviewer.

In education today, needed emphasis is being placed on finding alternative means of assessment. Recommendation is made that this research be continued and expanded in the field of writing to provide both asssessment methods that take into consideration that writing is a process and assessments to match the workshop strategy more closely.

Dissemination

The writer plans to continue the use of the solution in her classroom, both during the completion of this year and in ensuing school years. She may have the immediate privilege of sharing this implementation with other teachers and classes; the assistant principal has indicated that she would like to invite people from other schools to visit the workshops to observe what is being done. A copy of the practicum report will be presented to the assistant principal who is interested in writing and has participated in an alternative education task force. This could possibly open other avenues of dissemination.

In the future, the writer is interested in sharing the solution strategies with other schools and teachers, either on a consultation basis or in conferences. The strategies of the student-centered classroom, student ownership and

responsibility, and modification of the teacher's role are ones that are of importance to this writer. They will continue to influence her classroom and her interaction with students and schools. The sharing of these interests, as that develops, could possibly become part of career changes.

In addition, continuing with her own personal writing, the teacher plans to use events and information derived from the implementation in the composition of journal articles. A student wrote something in an evaluation that could well become a motto for writers: "The more I write, the more things I learn and understand." The implementer of this practicum, through her own work and writing, plans to continue to grow, educationally and personally, and share that growth with others.

A hint of other values of the solution has surfaced in discussions of how the students reveal themselves in their writing. Many are very open to putting on paper their past experiences and the problems in their lives. The comment was made that some therapeutic benefits may be occurring in the workshops. The teacher, as the editor, finds this very likely but has no idea presently if this knowledge could lead to other applications of this solution, but it is a thought.

The thrust of the practicum was to get students writing, help them to feel better about writing, and improve their ability to do that. Writing is, of course, an

individual skill, and students will develop in their own way, at their own rate, and in their own time. That was and is the point, and it is important to remember, as a student mentioned in her perception evaluation, that all people have some potential to express themselves in writing. Teacher-facilitators must make certain that students have the proper environment and stimulation to do so. They have something to say; they must be asked, allowed, and encouraged to say it!

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

STUDENT WRITING QUESTIONNAIRE

Based upon a general overview of student writing that you have seen in your classes or in your work with students this year, please rate each item. Using the given scale, indicate how often in your reading or grading of student work these statements have been true.

0=never; 1=rarely; 2=sometimes; 3=often; 4=usually; 5=always

FOCUS

_____Student demonstrates an awareness of the requirements of the task.

_____Student appears to have had no difficulty in expressing his ideas in written form.

_____Paper sustains a single point of view, if needed.

_____The purpose is clearly stated and maintained.

_____Writing exhibits clarity of thought.

CONTENT

_____The content of the writing is substantial, specific, and meaningful.

_____The use of content illustrates knowledge of subject.

_____Presentation of ideas is well-organized.

_____Ideas are sufficiently developed.

_____Logical order or sequence is evident.

STYLE

_____Sentence structure is correct and adds to the quality of the communication.

_____Variety in sentence structure and length is evident.

_____Word choice indicates precision in matching words to thoughts.

_____Word choice seems appropriate for the student's general ability.

MECHANICS

_____Correct usage of capitalization and punctuation adds to the clarity of the writing.

_____Spelling errors do not distract from the writing.

Above specifications adapted from the Pennsylvania Writing Assessment Holistic Scoring Guide, 1990.

In which of the above areas do you believe the students in this school are strong?

In which area(s) do you believe they are weak?

Which area(s) present the most problems in your reading or grading of student work?

Please list any other characteristics that appear to affect students' written communication either positively or negatively.

What percentage best indicates the number of students in this school who you believe are in need of additional instruction and development in writing skills?

0% 10% 30% 50% 70% 90% 100%

To what degree do you believe those students need that instruction?

Low Medium High Extreme

What specific procedures do you use in your assignments to support and encourage student writing?

Please add any comments that you wish regarding observations which you have made about the written work of the students or concerning this general subject of student writing.

APPENDIX B

PERCEPTION SURVEY

PERCEPTION SURVEY

This survey sheet is to serve as a base for writing two or three paragraphs expressing your present perceptions about yourself in regard to writing. Please consider each statement or question carefully, and then respond to it in your description of your feelings in this area. Do not simply copy and answer the questions individually, but use them to guide you in writing the paragraphs.

----I see (do not see) myself as a writer. Why?

----I spend time (do not spend time) writing when I am not required to do so.

----I enjoy (do not enjoy) writing. To what degree?

----My ability to communicate clearly is (is not) adequate for others to always get the correct message.

----I see my writing ability as sufficient (insufficient) for my present schoolwork.

----I see my present ability to write as sufficient (insufficient) for college work.

----I see my writing ability as sufficient (insufficient) for the kind of job I want. Explain details.

----My writing skills, as they are presently, will (will not) be a valuable tool for the future.

----The kinds of writing I enjoy doing are:

----My strengths in writing are:

----The problems in my present writing skills are:

----My evaluation of my personal writing growth over the last 3 or 4 years: